MEMOIRS of a CORPORATION

1850 1950

Weaving a Century

CHAPTER VIII

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PACIFIC MILLS

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MEMOIRS *of a* CORPORATION

The Story of Mary and Mack and Pacific Mills

with the editorial assistance of Josef Berger

Weaving a Century

PACIFIC MILLS

Executive Offices: 140 Federal Street

BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS

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DEDICATION

To the memory of those gallant workers of Pacific Mills who died in service of their country on the battlefields of four wars, this series of booklets is reverently dedicated . . .

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This is the eighth of a series of booklets being published by Pacific Mills at monthly intervals through the current year in commemoration of the founding of the company one hundred years ago.

If you did not receive the preceding chapters, Pacific Mills will be glad to send them to you on request. Write to Pacific Mills, 140 Federal Street, Boston 10, Mass.

VIII

In the Land of Cotton

(Mack, fourth-generation Pacific Mills employee, and his wife, Mary, are going through all the plants of the hundred-year-old corporation for which Mack's forefathers have worked from the early days. From the worsted mill in Lawrence, Massachusetts, they go South for a glimpse of cotton manufacture in the mills at Lyman and Columbia, South Carolina. What they learned of those plants, past and present, is told below.)

A large part of the Southern textile industry is concentrated within a swathe running southwesterly across North Carolina's Piedmont Plateau into the Upcountry of South Carolina.

Along the railroads and power lines that thread this area are the big mill towns — Greensboro, Kannapolis, Gastonia, Gaffney, Spartanburg, Greenville, Columbia — with their scores of smaller outlying villages.

In the development of the South this industry was a relatively late comer. Large-scale manufacture of cloth in that part of the country, sooner or later, was inevitable. But it was held back by war and "reconstruction," and its period of great growth started quite suddenly, dating from a single occasion in the year 1881.

At that time the International Cotton Exposition was held in Atlanta. "This Exposition," a chronicler of the textile trade

relates, "had been planned at the suggestion of Northern manufacturers to emphasize the raising and preparing of cotton, but instead its chief effect was to stimulate interest throughout the South in building cotton mills of their own."*

And so the mills sprang up. Installed spindleage in the South rose in the years 1881-90 from 561,000 to 1,530,000. That is how the big mill towns mushroomed through the swathe of territory crossing the Carolinas.

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In South Carolina there was plenty of water power in the streams. On the advantageous sites big mills and mill villages were built, complete with houses — such as they were — and eventually churches, stores and community services.

Out of the hills where they and their forefathers had lived for generations, prosperously at first but later in a losing race against want, came barefoot men and sunbonneted women, resolved to leave off their long struggle with the earth and learn how to run spinning frames and looms.

Of Scotch-Irish and German stock, these people were descended from small farmers who had settled the uplands before the Revolution.

Time was when, with a few slaves, the cotton growers of that isolated region did well enough. But cotton was a heavy feeder. Much of the land had been eaten out and eroded into gullies. Then came the war between the states — and final ruin.

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* Stephen Jay Kennedy, "Profits and Losses in Textiles," New York, 1936.

In the postwar years King Cotton was laid low, farms were mortgaged and crops gathered merely to be turned over to the lien merchants. When the mills came, the people were ready.

COLUMBIA

The city of Columbia, South Carolina, was born in 1786, a creature of compromise between the hard-working, ambitious farmers of the Upcountry and the Lowcountry aristocracy.

The "fall line," splitting the state on the bias between Chesterfield County in the Northeast and Aiken County in the Southwest, marked off the two sections. But it was more than a geological division; it separated two wholly different economic and social orders.

For years, across the "fall line," these two factions had been waging a cold war over the issue of where the state capital was to be located. At first the Lowcountrymen, having settled earlier, had the best of it. The government was in Charleston.

But the Upcountry folks were of a breed that was not to be shrugged off when they got around to asserting their rights. In Charleston there were hot legislative debates, sometimes street brawls, now and then a duel in the woods.

Finally a solution was worked out. In the exact middle of the state, where the plantation of Colonel Thomas Taylor lay along the Congaree River, a new city was laid out. There, meeting everybody halfway, was to be located the capital of South Carolina.

Colonel Taylor, Revolutionary fighter and early textile oper-

Cotton brokers of New Orleans in the "Reconstruction" era following the war between the states.

ator, didn't think much of the idea. "They spoiled a damned fine plantation," he growled, "to make a damned poor town."

The city wasn't very prepossessing at the start — when George Washington visited it the following year he described it as "an uncleared wood with very few houses in it" — but cotton soon changed the picture.

In 1801, South Carolina bought the right to make and use Eli Whitney's cotton gin. Then the white fields quickly spread over the country roundabout and business began to boom in Columbia. General Wade Hampton sold the cotton crop off his big plantation that same year for $90,000. Several factories were built to make gins.

Colonel Taylor, on what was left to him of his plantation, put up a small brick building, set a gang of slaves to work and in 1809 was manufacturing cloth for cotton bagging.

But no rapid spread of cotton clothmaking followed in South Carolina such as took place during the next few years in the North. Farmers went on hauling their crops to Charleston, to be shipped to New England. Made into cloth there, cotton then went back to Charleston, was hauled into the interior and resold to the farmers.

At the beginning of the war between the states there was only one mill making cotton goods in Columbia, and five years later Sherman burned that along with the rest of the town.

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When investment in Southern mills finally opened up in the eighties, a company was formed to buy the old Columbia Canal,

which had been built half a century earlier to give access to the city. The idea was to develop water power along the canal and thus attract the cotton goods industry.

Meanwhile an enterprising young engineer of Columbia, W. B. Smith Whaley, had been studying the textile mills of Fall River, Massachusetts. He came home convinced there was money to be made in cotton cloth in the South — not the coarse goods Carolina mills were then producing, but fine print cloths.

Whaley went into partnership with another young Columbian, Gadsden E. Shand. While Shand worked long nights over the blueprints for a new mill to make cotton print cloth, Whaley invested his shoe leather hustling around town to interest Columbia's leading citizens in the project.

The result of their planning — the Richland Mill — was a success from its start in 1895. In fact, Whaley and Shand were so sure they were right, and their enthusiasm was so catching, that even before all the machinery was installed in the Richland Mill, they were able to begin building another, twice as large, the Granby, on an adjacent site.

Richland was powered by steam, but in Granby the two venturesome engineers decided to try something new. In the face of much headshaking in their profession, they designed this mill to use electric current generated at the canal, two miles away. Granby was the first cotton mill in the world to operate without its own power plant on the premises.

A third mill, smaller than the others, the Capital City, was added to the group. But success of the business in fine-weave

cottons went beyond the partnership's fondest hopes. Five years later Whaley and Shand, again using local capital, took their biggest plunge.

This was the enormous Olympia Mill. As against the sixty thousand spindles installed in Granby, the new plant contained one hundred and ten thousand, which made it at that time — 1900 — and for many years afterward the largest cotton mill in the world under one roof. The steam power plant of Olympia was so big that as a side line it furnished electric current to run Columbia's trolley cars.

Whaley and Shand and their fellow-townsmen owned and worked all these mills until 1911, when they sold out to the Parker Cotton Mills Company, a combine operating out of Greenville, South Carolina. The group was renamed the Hampton Mills Company, in honor of South Carolina's favorite war hero, General Wade Hampton III, who fought Sherman and after the war, as Governor, brought the state out of the dark days of "Black and Tan Rule" of the reconstruction.

But the Parker outfit had bitten off more than it could chew. Though the four mills in Columbia had always made money, the parent company, through this and other purchases, had got into an over-extended financial position. After five years it was forced to let go for cash.

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It was just at this time — 1916 — that Pacific Mills decided for the first time in its long career to move into the South. It had completed the huge print works in Lawrence, with a ca-

There was wild excitement in Spartansburg when the railroad finally did come through in 1859.

pacity for handling thirty-six hundred miles of cloth a week, and a bleach house to match. Pacific wasn't weaving enough miles to keep its fifty-one printing machines and its eighty bleaching kiers busy.

A representative of Pacific went South, shopped around, saw a bargain in the distress offer of Parker properties and on the spot bought four of the combine's sixteen mills.

These were the four of the "Hampton Group" in Columbia. Along with them went a mill village of six hundred and fifty substantial houses, far better than the average of the kind — "not only very neat in appearance but so situated that each family can have its individual flower bed and vegetable garden."

The four mills added two hundred thousand spindles and five thousand looms to Pacific's equipment for making gray cloth. This meant an additional production of one million yards a week — enough when put together with the output of the Cocheco Mill in Dover and that of the main mill in Lawrence to feed the hungry finishing and printing works.

. . .

A few old-timers still recall what life in the mills was like before Pacific came to Columbia. Walter M. Martin, for fifty-one years an employee of Pacific and its predecessors, began work as a sweeper in the Richland Mill at fourteen cents a day. That was in 1895, when the working day was twelve hours.

When he decided to become a spinner, Walter says he had to spend three months learning on his own time. There was no on-job training program in those times such as Pacific offered later. The machinery wasn't any too safe to work with, and it was up to the operatives to look out for their own necks. There were no vacations — with pay or without — nor any other benefits for employees.

"Life was a good deal harder when I began work in 1895," Walter says, "than when I quit in 1946."

Between 1910 and 1930 the population of Columbia doubled. The city grew up around the old mill village and engulfed it. Then, because it was no longer practical to own the houses as a unified community, the company sold them. The proceeds from these alone offset in large part the original cost of the mills.

The sheeting and toweling manufactured here are sent "in the gray" to Pacific's big mill at Lyman, ninety miles away, to be bleached, finished and packaged.

LYMAN

In the year 1816, two cotton mills were built on the banks of the Tyger River where it flows through Spartanburg County. Their owners dreamed of a great manufacturing center in the land of cotton. But they didn't prosper. Their big trouble was lack of transportation.

When the weather allowed, trains of Conestoga wagons, each drawn by four or six horses with jingling bells on their harnesses, dared the hard run 'cross-state to Charleston. But no

matter how many horses were hitched to them, the wagons became immovable fixtures in the Carolina landscape when the red clay got wet and held them by the hubs.

Near mid-century Charleston interests wanted to build a railroad across the state to the Upcountry. Folks in Spartanburg prayed for it. But for some years there was trouble getting the right-of-way because the Lowcountry plantation owners looked down their noses at the iron horse.

One of them complained that "the engine will run over my little negro slaves and kill them, and the noise of the trains, such as the blowing of whistles and ringing of bells, will seriously disturb the quiet and repose of the citizens."

There was wild excitement in Spartanburg when the railroad finally did come through in 1859. In a celebration to welcome the first train, the Spartans dug trenches and barbecued four tons of meat.

. . .

When Pacific Mills came to Spartanburg County in 1924, the dream of the pioneer mill builders had long since come true. Now some forty mills and mill villages dotted the red clay flatlands and the Blue Ridge foothills roundabout.

Twelve miles from town, and not far from the spot on the banks of the Tyger where the first of the little original mills had stood a century earlier, Pacific bought a seven-hundred-and-fifty acre tract. Within a few months the pines and brambles had given way to a great four-story mill with a warehouse, bleachery, boiler plant, million-gallon reservoir and elaborate filter installation.

Around the mill a town was built, three hundred seventy-five houses of five and six rooms, a school, community center and store buildings. The town of Lyman, South Carolina, had sprung into being, and Pacific Mills was ready to turn out a million and a half yards of sheets and pillowcases a week.

In its literature of the time, the company said Lyman was "considered by many to be the finest village in the South." And so it was. The mill, with its clean-cut, strictly utilitarian design, its large glassed area, was something new to that neighborhood in its day. The inviting houses had about them a look of permanency. Trees, lawns and plots for gardens made the South Carolinians stare and ask, "Is it really a mill village, or are they fixin' to make a movie?"

Both the plant and the town have grown in this first quarter-century of Lyman's life. In the beginning there were 650 employees. More recently the payroll has gone as high as 2,800.

On their visit, Mary and Mack found much that was new to them here. Lyman was a world in itself.

"Yet these people aren't isolated as were workers who lived in the mill villages of the old days," their guide told them. "Neither in the scope of their thinking nor in actual experience. They have radios, they have cars. And Spartanburg, with 30,000 people, is close by."

He went on to say that of Pacific Mills' employees at Lyman, eight hundred, or a little more than a fourth of the total, live in the village with their families. The others have homes in the country, some as far away as thirty miles. Most of them own

small farms, where some member of the family does the housekeeping and chores.

"You must have noticed the fine peach orchards all through this country. Many a Pacific Mills family adds to its yearly income from the peach trees. The company cooperates with the workers who have these orchards by arranging, so far as its work-schedule permits, to let them off a few days at peach-picking time."

. . .

The first shift comes on at the mill in Lyman at seven o'clock, amid the whirring of spindles and clattering of looms that have been going steadily through the night.

Textile men will tell you there is no connection between the manufacture of wool fabrics and that of cottons. To the "worsted man" the cotton industry is a world apart, about which he professes to know no more than he would about making shoes.

Yet as they were shown through the mill in Lyman, Mary and Mack saw several processes that closely resembled the corresponding ones they had seen at Lawrence in the making of woolens and worsteds.

When the tightly packed five-hundred-pound bales were broken out, the cotton was fluffed, cleaned of foreign matter which the gin had missed and then shaped into wide rolls. These were carded, coming out in the form of a loose strand, much the same as wool had appeared at that stage. The drawing, spinning and weaving that followed were also similar.

When the five hundred pound bales were broken out, the cotton was fluffed, cleaned, then shaped into wide rolls.

The woven cotton cloth was singed to remove the nap, soaked to take out the sizing, washed and then bleached in tanks that were called "kiers" and operated like giant pressure-cookers.

Some of the cloth was then dyed, some prepared for printing and some finished as towels, sheets and pillowcases — cut, hemmed, folded and sent off in attractive cellophane containers.

In the print room, a long battery of machines that looked like distant relations of the newspaper printing press were turning out a big eyeful of color as the cloth moved endlessly through them, coming out in different designs.

The color was transferred to the cloth from copper rollers on which the designs had been engraved. Some prints required many colors but, whether one or half a dozen, the multiple-rollered machines turned them out in a single operation. Printing on cloth calls for a high degree of skill. The workmen operating these machines were paid top wages in the plant.

. . .

Even in far-away Lawrence, Mary and Mack had heard of "Southern hospitality." Here among the folks of Lyman, plant executives as well as workpeople, they experienced it at first hand. All through the little town there was a friendly warmth, in the houses of the workers and in the larger ones on Ridge Road where the company officials lived.

Society in Lyman is closely knit. The mill's personnel officer knows his people by their first names, is friendly with their families, understands their troubles and their hopes. He spoke proudly to Mary and Mack of the Lyman Mill's people.

"The fact that more than ninety per cent of these Southern workers are of native-born parents, of Anglo-Saxon origin, makes them no better and no worse than other Americans. They take pride in that origin, but I feel that the folks here have even better reason to be proud of their own record.

"The life of their fathers and grandfathers as farmers was very hard. But the mill workers of this generation have come a long way from that old background.

"Largely through the opportunity to work in industry, there has arisen a new type of Southern workingman. You don't hear

much about him, you won't find him in the novels and plays written on the South. He is a proud, independent, skilled worker who has set his sights high, lives in a decent home and is educating his children.

"Many of our people are high school graduates. The average education here in the mill is second year high. And some of the families have boys and girls in college.

"Every now and then one of these young people comes through with a stand-out achievement. A couple of years ago, for example, one of our men, John Hill, was chosen for a Rhodes Scholarship and sent overseas to study at Oxford. That is one of the highest honors an American student can win.

"Young Johnny Hill came to Lyman from a worn-out farm in Cherokee County where for generations, ever since the days of pioneers and Indian fighters, his people had looked to the plow for subsistence and to the rifle for protection. Johnny had never gone to school at all until he was eleven.

"When he came here, he worked in the mill at night, learned to be a card grinder, and at the same time put himself through high school and then through Wofford College, in Spartanburg, with top honors all the way.

"That same year another Pacific Mills boy, Jimmy White, was awarded an appointment to the United States Naval Academy at Annapolis. He had finished his freshman year at the University of South Carolina with a straight A average, and was working here to save up enough money so that he could go on with his college education.

"Pacific lost a couple of good operatives when those young fellows left us, but of course we're happy to lose as many as can make the grade over that particular route — and more power to them!"

. . .

As in Lawrence, Pacific Mills on the other side of the Mason and Dixon Line is definitely a worker's preference. In every one of the towns where it operates, Mary and Mack ran into the same story — a long list of applicants beating a track to "the Pacific," not because there were no jobs to be had elsewhere but because, as one of the girls in the spinning room at Lyman put it, "at the Pacific we can work with our own kind of folks."

It is this "kind of folks" — working people, resolved on self-improvement, setting new standards for their communities, and preserving the tradition of warmth, neighborliness and hospitality of their forefathers — who are the hope of the South today.

A century ago, when Pacific Mills gathered to itself people who were similarly resolved on a better life in New England, its future was secure. Those who seek it out will find that same strength of character everywhere in America.

To do its share and more for the best-clothed army in the world, Pacific Mills in World War II taxed the abilities of its people and plant to the limit. Along with fabrics for uniforms, hats and many other items, the Worsted Division, as its part of the job, turned out material for millions of wool shirts — more than enough for each man in the army.

So enormous was this burden of war work that, while the end was not yet in sight, Pacific's management realized the best efforts of the mill at Lawrence, as sole source of its worsted production, might not be enough to hit both the near-term and long-term targets on which the company's sights were set.

In addition to manufacturing millions of pounds of wool into cloth for the military, Pacific was called on to supply an essential minimum of civilian needs. Then, too, after victory, while the mills would be changing back to peacetime production, millions of men and women in the armed forces would be doing their own personal "reconverting" from uniforms to civilian clothes.

Anticipating the big war load, the mill at Lawrence had begun modernizing its equipment early in 1940. But the management was also looking beyond, to a broader future in which Pacific, recapturing its old role of leadership, would come out with new fabrics, new styling and new production economies in an aggressive bid for the postwar market.

For this, something different in the way of plant setup was needed — decentralization and further modernizing of the Worsted Division.

It could be done with a group of ultra-modern, highly efficient mills of moderate size, each more flexible than the big mill at Lawrence and each able to concentrate on certain kinds of fabrics.

Accordingly at headquarters in Boston a major program was blueprinted, not only to speed up production for the armed

forces — though the new mills could be put to that use as long as they were needed — but also as a sound undertaking for the long term.

Next month Pacific Mills will send you another installment of "Memoirs of a Corporation, Weaving a Century." It will be entitled "Chapter IX: Tomorrow's Mills Today."

Pacific
Worsteds Woolens

COTTONS
PACIFIC
RAYONS